

# *Nathan Hale*



But One Life to Give

## **Nathan Hale's One Life**

Born to a farming family in Coventry, Connecticut, on June 6, 1755, Nathan Hale entered Yale College at the age of 16. There he met Benjamin Tallmadge, a classmate, and he graduated two years later, in 1773, becoming a schoolteacher in New London. He was described at that time as being about 5'10", medium build, blue eyes, and medium brown hair.

He determined to join the army when, in April 1775 the call to arms was sounded, and exhorted an assembly in New London to "march immediately and never lay down our arms until we obtain our independence." He did not himself march immediately, but first made arrangements to complete his duties in the school. Then he enlisted in the third company of the seventh Connecticut regiment under Col. Charles Webb. On 1 September he was promoted to captain.

On 1 January 1776 he was commissioned by Congress as a Captain in the 19th Regiment of Foot commanded by Colonel Charles Webb. All this time he was encamped around Boston and took part in no significant engagement. When enlistments were running out in November 1775 with no prospect for continuing the pay of the men in his company, he convinced them to "tarry another month" and he would divide his own pay among them. He was held in high regard, it was said, by his men and was a favorite of his commanders. In April 1776, he marched with the Army to the Grand Battery near New York where he was encamped until the latter part of September when he went to Harlem.

While at the Grand Battery, he mounted a special operation to capture a British sloop anchored in the East River. A small raiding party, under the cover of darkness, crossed the river, boarded the sloop, and took the crew prisoner. Hale sailed the ship to the American side of the river and distributed the captured supplies to his own men.

After the battle of Long Island, the American army retreated to Harlem Heights to await the next move of the British commander, General William Howe. Just what that move would be, was a question that perplexed General George Washington. The British options were numerous and the American commander was completely in the dark. He wrote on September 6th that "we cannot learn, nor have we been able to procure the least information of late."

To better peer through this fog of uncertainty, Washington created a reconnaissance company under Lieut. Col. Thomas Knowlton, an experienced Connecticut officer. Their job was to reconnoiter British positions and attempt to sweep up some Hessian deserters or capture some enemy pickets. But General Howe had taken precautions and British counterintelligence was good. Washington decided that a man was needed in the British camp to obtain the kind of information he needed on enemy intentions. Colonel Knowlton was called in and given the job of finding a volunteer to undertake this hazardous, and in the genteel tradition of the day, deceitful mission.

The requirements for the job were laid out by I.W. Stuart, Hale's biographer. "Accurate estimates of the numbers of the enemy, of their distribution of the form and position of their various encampments, of their marchings and countermarchings, of their concentration at one point or another of the instruments of war, but more than all of their plan of attack, as derived from the open report, or the unguarded whispers in camp of officers or men—estimates of all these things, requiring a quick eye, a cool head, a practiced pencil, military science, general intelligence, and plaible [sic] address, were to be made. The common soldier would not answer the purpose, and the mercenary might yield to the higher seductions of the enemy, and betray his employers."

When Knowlton appealed to the officers and NCOs of his Rangers, he was met with silence. They must have been considering the sure fate of a captured spy—death by hanging. A sergeant expressed what was the common feeling of the group. “I am ready to fight the British at any place and time, but I do not feel willing to go among them to be hung up like a dog!”

Then, when it appeared that no one would answer the call, an officer lately arrived at the formation, Captain Nathan Hale, stepped forward and said, “I will undertake it.” His fellow officers attempted to dissuade him, pointing out the dangers and the possibility of an unworthy end. He answered them decisively and ardently:

I think I owe to my country the accomplishment of an object so important, and so much desired by the Commander of her armies—and I know no other mode of obtaining the information, than by assuming a disguise, and passing into the enemy’s camp. I am fully sensible of the consequences of discovery and capture in such a situation. But for a year I have been attached to the army, and have not rendered any material service, while receiving a compensation for which I make no return. Yet I am not influenced by the expectation of promotion or pecuniary reward. I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary for the public good, becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claims to the performance of that service are imperious!

Hale reported in person to the commander in chief to receive his instructions. On September 16th, Washington wrote to Congress: “I have sent out some reconnoitering parties to gain intelligence, if possible, of the disposition of the enemy.” He was probably referring to Knowlton’s Rangers and the special mission entrusted to one of their number, Nathan Hale. Sometime in the middle of September, Hale set out with Sergeant Stephen Hemstead of his company to make the crossing to Long Island.

They engaged the armed sloop *Huntington* and crossed 50 miles north at Norwalk on the Connecticut shore. Changing from his officer’s uniform into the plain brown suit and broad-brimmed hat of a schoolmaster and retaining of his possessions only his Yale diploma, he once again boarded the sloop and crossed the sound to a point near Huntington. Now on his own in enemy-held territory, he moved among the camps of the British troops for five days, making sketches of the British fortifications.

His mission completed, he traveled back to Huntington where he had originally landed, there to await prearranged transportation back across the sound. It was there he was apprehended and searched. They found secreted in the inner soles of his shoes sketches of British forts and field works and notes made in Latin. He was sent back to Howe’s headquarters in New York on September 21st where he appeared before the British commander. He confessed that he was an American officer and a spy and was sentenced by Howe to be hung the next morning at daybreak.

At a public hanging at first light on September 22, 1776, Nathan Hale was led to the gallows. His last words were reported to be “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country!” The British Provost William Cunningham ordered “Swing the rebel off!” and Captain Hale’s life was forfeited for the sake of military intelligence.

The Nathan Hale story, aside from being an inspirational example of patriotism, is revealing of two essential truths about intelligence work. First, it entails grave risk, an obvious and tragic fact that can be seen as the military intelligence honor roll unfurls over the next two centuries, inscribed with too many names following that of Nathan Hale and ending, for now, with Lt. Col. Arthur Nicholson.

The second attribute is the general opprobrium in which spying

was held by most societies in most times. Hale's fellow officers and NCOs tried to dissuade him from undertaking this mission, not because of its physical danger, but because of its ungentlemanly associations. It was an attitude that prevailed in the U.S. Army. It was probably the reason that U.S. congressmen turned their backs on Hitchcock's Mexican Spy Company after 1847 and the cause for referring to Eifler's Burma commandos as "thugs." Arthur Wagner made an important distinction. Writing in 1893, he divided intelligencers into two classes:

The first class consists of officers or soldiers who, from patriotism or a sense of military duty, assume a disguise, and penetrate the enemy's lines to gain information. They are often men of the most exalted character and distinguished courage, and deserve a better fame, and a better fate if captured, than that usually accorded to spies.

The second class consists of men who often deserve all the obloquy so freely cast upon spies in general....<sup>1</sup>

The unfavorable characterization may have carried over to officers engaged in intelligence work and, by association, slighted their status among fellow officers in the years to come.

A statue of Nathan Hale stands in front of the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. Standing there, Hale's monumental presence rankled at least one iconoclastic CIA director, William Casey, who correctly assessed Hale's mission as a failure and reasoned that Hale too must be lacking in operational efficiency. The remark was retailed in the press and has become a sort of shibboleth for those who wish us to believe they have never been unsuccessful. If success is to become an attendant requirement for courage, loyalty, self service, etc., then many of our veterans, including all those who served in a losing cause in Vietnam, will have to return their medals. Some, like Hale, lost their lives, the ultimate inefficiency. Hale's reputation as an intrepid officer, if less than successful intelligence operative, will survive 20th century carping and remain an inspiration and a venerated ideal for generations of 21st century American soldiers.

#### Notes

[This account is based on: Stuart, I.W., *Life of Captain Nathan Hale, the Martyr-Spy of the American Revolution*, F.A. Brown, Hartford, Conn., 1856.]

1. Wagner, *The Service of Security and Information*, Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Company, Kansas City, Missouri, 1895, p. 200-6.